Feast of Fools

The **Feast of Fools** (Latin: *festum fatuorum*, *festum stultorum*) was a feast day celebrated by the clergy in Europe during the Middle Ages, initially in Northern France, but later more widely. During the Feast, participants would elect either a false Bishop, false Archbishop or false Pope.[1][2] Ecclesiastical ritual would also be parodied and higher and lower level clergy would change places.[2][1] The passage of time has considerably obscured modern understandings of the nature and meaning of this celebration, which originated in proper liturgical observance, and has more to do with other examples of medieval liturgical drama than with either the earlier pagan (Roman) feasts of Saturnalia and Kalends or the later bourgeois lay sotie.[3]

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Context

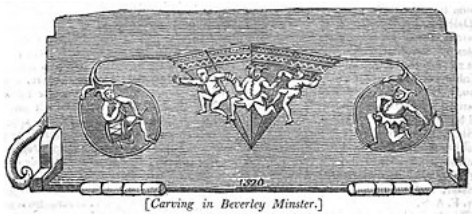
The central idea appears to have been a brief social revolution, in which power, dignity and impunity is briefly conferred on those in a subordinate position. In the views of later commentators, this makes the medieval festival a successor to the Roman Kalends of January, although there is no continuity between the two celebrations.[4] Lower level clergy would participate in the festival and hold masses which would mock usual church traditions.[2]

Many of the most colourful descriptions of the medieval festival are a result of centuries of misunderstandings and unscholarly conflations of events widely dispersed in time and place; most rely on the condemnations of later writers, which either exaggerate or deliberately misreport what was effectively an orderly, if not always fully scripted, liturgical celebration with some dramatic elements.[5] The involvement of inversion (subdeacons occupying the roles normally fulfilled by higher clergy) and the 'fools' symbolised orthodox biblical ideas of humility (e.g. the last being first) and becoming a 'fool for Christ' (1 Corinthians 4:10).[6]

In the Middle Ages, particularly in France, the Feast of Fools was staged on or about the Feast of the Circumcision, 1 January. It is related to certain other liturgical dramas, such, for example, as the Feast of the Ass, the Play of Daniel, and the Office of the Star. So far as the Feast of Fools had an independent existence, it seems to have grown out of a special "festival of the subdeacons", which John Beleth, a liturgical writer of the twelfth century sometimes thought to have been an Englishman by birth, assigns to the day of the Circumcision. He is the earliest to draw attention to the fact that, as the deacons had a special celebration on St Stephen's day 26 December, the priests on St John the Evangelist's day 27 December, and again the choristers and mass-servers on the Feast of the Holy Innocents on 28 December, so the subdeacons were accustomed to hold their feast about the same time of year, but more particularly on the festival of the Circumcision.

Official condemnation

The Feast of Fools and the almost blasphemous extravagances in some instances associated with it were constantly the object of sweeping condemnations of the medieval Church. On the other hand, some Catholic writers have thought it necessary to try to deny the existence of such abuses. One interpretation that reconciles this contradiction is that, while there can be no question that Church authorities of the calibre of Robert Grosseteste repeatedly condemned the licence of the Feast of Fools in the strongest terms, such firmly rooted customs took centuries to eradicate. It is certain that the practice lent itself to serious abuses, whose nature and gravity varied at different epochs. It should be said that among the thousands of European liturgical manuscripts the occurrence of anything which has to do with the Feast of Fools is extraordinarily rare. It never occurs in the principal liturgical books, the missals and breviaries. There are traces occasionally in a prose or a trope found in a gradual or an antiphonary. It would therefore seem there was little official approval for such extravagances, which were rarely committed to writing.



Feast of Fools, Misericord carving in Beverley Minster, East Yorkshire[7]

With a view to checking the abuses committed in the celebration of the Feast of Fools on New Year's Day at Notre-Dame de Paris in the twelfth century, the celebration was not entirely banned, but the part of the "Lord of Misrule" or "Precentor Stultorum" was restrained, so that he was to be allowed to intone the prose "Laetemur gaudiis", and to wield the precentor's staff, but this before the first Vespers of the feast, not during it. During the second Vespers, it had been the custom that the precentor of the fools should be deprived of his staff when the verse in the Magnificat, *Deposuit potentes de sede* ("He has put down the mighty from their seat") was sung. Hence the feast was often known as the "Festum 'Deposuit'". Eudes de Sully allowed the staff to be taken at that point from the mock precentor, but laid down that the verse "Deposuit" not be repeated more than five times. There was a similar case of a legitimised Feast of Fools at Sens about 1220, where the whole text of the office has survived. There are many proses and interpolations (*farsurae*) added to the ordinary liturgy, but nothing much unseemly. This prose or *conductus*, was not a part of the office, but only a preliminary to Vespers. In 1245 Cardinal Odo, the papal legate in France, wrote to the Chapter of Sens Cathedral demanding that the feast be celebrated with no un-clerical dress and no wreaths of flowers.

The Feast of Fools was forbidden under the severe penalties by the Council of Basel in 1431 and a strongly worded document issued by the theological faculty of the University of Paris in 1444; numerous decrees of provincial councils followed. The Feast of Fools was condemned by early Protestants, and among Catholics it seems that the abuse had largely disappeared by the time of the Council of Trent, though instances of festivals of this kind survived in France as late as the 16th century.[1]

In popular culture

Victor Hugo recreated a picturesque account of a Feast of Fools in his 1831 novel *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, in which it is celebrated on January 6, 1482 and Quasimodo serves as Pope of Fools. This is shown in Disney's 1996 animated film version of the novel through the song "Topsy Turvy".

See also

- Play of Daniel
- Feast of the Ass
- Liturgical drama
- April Fool's Day
- Carnival

References

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Further reading

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External links

- *Catholic Encyclopedia*: "Feast of Fools" (http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/06132a.htm)
- Music for the Feast of Fools (http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio3/earlymusicshow/pip/4394e/)

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